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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a case study that serves as an example of a conflict mediation program in a small high school in Missouri. The program began with the following goals: 1) to reduce the number of conflicts in the school; 2) to empower students with the ability to solve their own conflicts; 3) to teach conflict resolution skills to students; and 4) to share with students the responsibility of creating a positive school culture and climate. The data represent an 8-year period beginning in 1991 and ending in 1999. The program focused on four factors: the selection of mediators, the role of the mediators, mediator training, and the procedure the mediator would follow. Three observations were made during this study. First, the fact that suspensions for fighting decreased dramatically was obvious. Second, verbal confrontation between students also decreased but not as dramatically as physical confrontations. It became clear that some conflicts spontaneously combusted, and peer mediation programs were not effective in reducing this type of conflict. Third, the general atmosphere on campus grew more relaxed, students started relating better to each other, and school climate improved on a yearly basis. These observations led to three conclusions: students do respond positively to intervention; conflict mediation programs reduce physical confrontations only to a certain level; and peer mediation does improve school climate. (MKA)

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# Reducing Violence in the High School

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## Reducing Violence in the High School

School safety has been forced to the forefront of the myriad of problems facing school administrators. Most initial responses to the problem of school safety have focused on external controls, such as crisis management plans, locked doors, student and teacher identity cards, and school safety officers. With more violence forecast there is little doubt that external controls have become necessary. However, what is often overlooked in this quest for safer schools is the fact that school violence is usually not expressed by bombs and gunfire, but rather by student to student interpersonal conflict. Student to student interpersonal conflict is the most disruptive factor in the high school. It is this type of insidious conflict that has the greatest impact on students, and voraciously consumes administrator time and energy (Thorsen-Spano, 1996).

There is little doubt that students have a tremendous influence on one another and that peer relationships are extremely important to them. In schools where tension between groups exists, student anxiety and stress results in concerns about violence and perceptions of danger. Students prefer a school community where students for the most part get along and some fluidity between groups is common practice (Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992).

Conflict is a part of the maturing process. However, students involved in conflict are often forced by peer pressure and self-image to refuse to budge from their position. Any effort to resolve the conflict short of physical confrontation is perceived as a sign of weakness (Johnson and Johnson, 1996). Consequently, student to student conflict takes a toll on the psyche of many teens. Conflict often results in fear, alienation, withdrawal,

attendance problems, and academic difficulty. Thus conflict is not usually viewed by adolescents as a positive force in their lives, and they often actively seek alternatives. One of the more effective ways of reducing interpersonal conflict is peer conflict mediation. Conflict mediation assumes that many students, stimulated by the negative emotions of interpersonal conflict, are willing to seek the relative safety of a mediation process as an alternative to physical confrontation.

The following case study serves as an example of a conflict mediation program in a small high school in Missouri. The data represent an eight-year period beginning in 1991 and ending in 1999. During this time, the principal, counselor, and a majority of the teaching staff remained constant.

## A Conflict Mediation Case Study

CCHS is a small high school in Missouri located 25 miles south of St. Louis. The student population can be described as a rural/suburban mix. Approximately 20% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch and the student body is racially mixed. Although built in 1939, CCHS has been well maintained and gives the illusion of substance and quality. This illusion began to crumble in the late 1980s and early 1990s as enrollment quickly declined from over 250 students to 215 students. Even as enrollment declined, the number of students suspended for physical fighting rose to an average of 3.5 per month. A tension between student groups was evident, teachers were uncomfortable, and the school climate was not positive.

It was decided to confront the problem of physical confrontation with the group that has the most impact on teens: other teens. The CCHS conflict mediation program began in 1992 with the following goals: 1) to reduce the number of conflicts in the

school, 2) to empower students with the ability to solve their own conflicts, 3) to teach conflict resolution skills to students, and 4) to share with students the responsibility of creating a positive school culture and climate. To accomplish these goals, it was decided to focus on the following four factors: the selection of mediators, the role of the mediators, mediator training, and the procedure the mediators would follow.

The Selection of Mediators

Peer mediators can be defined as students who guide their peers in conflict with other students through a mediation process to reach a mutually agreeable solution ( Rozmus, 1997). The CCHS program involves students in grades 9-12. After some experimentation with younger students as mediators, it was decided in 1994 that only junior and senior students should be eligible for selection as mediators. After restricting selection to only junior and senior students, 25-30% of the junior and senior class commonly applied to become mediators.

Mediators should represent, as much as possible, a cross section of the student body by race, gender, and achievement level. Mediators can be selected from a pool of applicants generated by self-nomination (the CCHS process), peer nomination, teacher nomination, or some combination (Day-Vines, et al., 1996). The CCHS experience indicates that between 10-14 students, equally divided by gender, is the optimal number. Several selection factors reported in the literature can be considered. The mediators should have the respect of their peers, speak the language of their peers, have the ability to remain neutral among varied peer groups, and posses sensitivity, maturity, self-confidence and trustworthiness. However, academic proficiency, which can be a factor, should not be an automatic indicator of good mediation skills (Day-Vines et al., 1996).

In the CCHS program, self-confidence, trustworthiness, and the perceived ability to maintain confidentiality take precedence over any other selection criteria. Behavior and/or poor academic achievement does not necessarily remove a student from consideration. However, poor attendance automatically disqualifies a student.

The Mediators Role

A certain amount of trust must be given the mediators since the mediation process occurs in relative privacy in an outer office area some distance from the nearest adult. This trust is essential if the empowerment of students to solve their own problems is a goal of the mediation process (Rozmus, 1997). Thus it is necessary to establish what peer mentors will and will not do in their role. In the CCHS model the mediators assume the following four roles: 1) to help individual students solve conflicts with other individual students, 2) to empower students in conflict to elect to solve the conflict in a positive manner, 3) to teach and model resolution skills to other students, and 4) to follow-up with students who have participated in the process. Mediators are not allowed to become involved in teacher/student conflicts, to solve group conflicts, or to mediate any student behaviors that are cause for disciplinary action.

The concept of a mutually agreeable solution is essential to an effective conflict mediation program. A solution will strike the students as fair only if they believe that by agreeing to the proposed solution one student has not been taken advantage of, been forced to give in to claims by the other student, or had the solution imposed by the mediators.

Training

The CCHS program is sponsored by the principal who selects the mediators and provides the initial training. The initial training consists of an introduction to mediation, the mechanics of the process, and role-playing. Confidentiality, judgment, responsibility, and good manners are stressed as well as when it may be necessary to involve either the sponsor or the school counselor. Additional training is completed off campus and stresses team building within the mediation group, interpersonal relationship skills, the importance of neutrality, and group dynamics. This part of the training is funded by a Safe and Drug Free Schools grant.

Procedure

Students in conflict can be referred by anyone associated with CCHS. After referral, and an assessment of the validity and urgency of the conflict, the sponsor selects one male and one female mediator regardless of the gender of the referred students. This mixture of gender in the mediation team has proven to be very workable and often has expedited the mediation process. The selected mediators meet with the students in conflict and, following a prescribed outline, work with the students to reach a win-win resolution.

The process is relatively straightforward. Before meeting with the students in conflict, the mediators decide among themselves which role each will play. One mediator plays the role of lead mediator or director. As indicated by the title, this mediator assumes the leadership role and directs the process. The second mediator assumes the role of reflector. This mediator is more passive and silent than the director, but plays the most important role. It is the responsibility of the reflector to accurately

reflect the beliefs, feelings, and claims of the individual students involved in the mediation process. It is from the accuracy of this reflection that an equitable solution, agreeable to both parties, is often derived.

After deciding which role each will play, the mediators introduce themselves to the students in conflict, explain their role, and establish the following five ground rules: agree to solve the problem, agree that statements will remain confidential, agree to be honest, agree not to interrupt, and agree to no name calling or put-downs. The mediation process begins with each student telling his or her side of the story to the mediators. The mediators repeat the story to both students to make sure that everyone understands the issues. The students in conflict are than asked to tell their side to one another, bringing out facts and feelings. The mediators again summarize the facts and feelings of the students. The crucial step is asking both parties how they can solve the problem. After writing down proposed solutions and discussing the pros and cons of these solutions, the students in conflict are then asked to agree to a mutually acceptable solution. Again, the solution must be perceived by the students in conflict to be equitable and fair and not arbitrarily imposed. At this point, a contract is written and both parties sign the contract agreeing to the solution.

## Data Analysis

The CCHS conflict mediation program was launched in December 1992. Monthly suspension data for the previous school year and the first three months of 1992 where used as baseline data to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in reducing out-of-school suspensions for fighting. Over the next six months of the 1992-93 school year, suspensions for fighting fell from an average of 3.60 suspensions per month to an average

of 1.16 suspensions per month, a 67% decrease from baseline data. Even as enrollment increased by 45% to 280 students over the next eight-year period, out-of-school suspensions for physical fighting remained consistently less than 1.25 suspensions per month. Of similar interest, during this 8-year period not a single suspension for fighting was recorded between any two students that had been through the mediation process.

---Insert Table One ---

As valuable as peer conflict mediation can be in the reduction of school violence, it can be an even more meaningful and valuable experience for the students trained as mediators. A survey of twelve mediators conducted in the spring of 1999 found that they had been involved in 67 mediations involving 134 students. All twelve students strongly agreed that they would recommend the conflict mediation training to friends, and 85% agreed or strongly agreed that their mediation skills had helped them in other aspects of their lives. The mediators reported satisfaction with their mediation skills, believed that the training was beneficial, and that the students involved in mediation seemed satisfied With the mediation process. All twelve mediators believed that they were effective in helping their peers solve problems, that the mediation program had helped reduce physical fighting in the school, and that the program should continue.

The success of peer mediation programs is a function of the perceptions of the students who take part in the process. A survey of 52 students involved in the CCHS mediation process during 1997-98 found that 87% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the mediators were fair, 67% agreed or strongly agreed that the process was positive, and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that the conflict was solved. However, 60% of the respondents reported that they would not refer someone else for conflict mediation.

## Summary

During this eight-year period, three observations were made. The fact that suspensions for fighting decreased dramatically was obvious. Verbal confrontation between students also decreased but not as dramatically as physical confrontations. Students involved in verbal confrontations were usually referred either by a faculty member or by another student for conflict mediation before the situation escalated to a physical confrontation. It became clear that some conflicts spontaneously combusted, and peer mediation programs were not effective in reducing this type of conflict.

The third observation was that a more wide-sweeping change began to permeate the school. The general atmosphere on campus grew more relaxed, students started relating better to one another, and school climate improved on a yearly basis. In a school where tension between student groups was accepted and suspensions for fighting were a common occurrence, an atmosphere of cooperation, friendliness, and ease became more the norm. Hallways became much more pleasant and the overall school atmosphere significantly improved.

These observations led to three conclusions: 1) students do respond positively to intervention, 2) conflict mediation programs reduce student physical confrontations only to a certain level, and 3) peer mediation does improve school climate.

Table One

CCHS Suspension Data

1991-1999

| Year | Enrollment | Suspensions | Average/Month |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1991-92 | 225 | 33 | 3.60 |
| 1992-93 (Sept-Nov) | 210 | 11 | 3.60 |
| 1992-93 (Dec-May) | 210 | 7 | 1.16 |
| 1993-94 | 250 | 10 | 1.12 |
| 1994-95 | 322 | 22 | 2.45 |
| 1995-96 | 309 | 10 | 1.12 |
| 1996-97 | 285 | 9 | 1.00 |
| 1997-98 | 279 | 6 | 0.67 |
| 1998-99 | 283 | 7 | 0.78 |

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